

i don't have a choice (but i'd still choose you) by inkyreveries

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Summary:

It's been one week. Seven days since whatever-the-hell was sealed away in the Upside Down and Steve is doing his best to return to normal life. So far it isn't working, considering the five children he now has following him around (one stubborn curly-haired one in particular), his still incredibly fucked up face (courtesy of Billy fucking Hargrove), and he's pretty sure he has PTSD.

Steve really is trying.

1. I

Author's Note:

I dunno, man, I outlined this fic months ago and now feel compelled to see it through.

It's been one week. Seven days since whatever-the-hell was sealed away in the Upside Down and Steve is doing his best to return to normal life. So far it isn't working, considering the five children he now has following him around (one stubborn curly-haired one in particular), his *still* incredibly fucked up face (courtesy of Billy fucking Hargrove), and he's pretty sure he has PTSD.

Steve really is trying.

It's Thursday, and Thursday means basketball, and Steve fucking hates basketball now that Billy is on the team. Ever since their fight, Billy has been doing everything he can to get a rise out of Steve. Steve is too busy trying his best to keep his shit together during the school day and doesn't have it in him to respond, which only seems to spur Billy on.

What the fuck is wrong with this guy?

Basketball practice is pretty much the same as it was on Tuesday. Billy is captain of his team and immediately crows "skins!" before whipping his discarded shirt at Steve with a taunting grin. He then proceeds to knock Steve down at every possible moment. Hard.

"Look alive Harrington!" His laugh grates on Steve's ears as he lays—panting—on the gymnasium floor, watching Billy head for the showers, the rest of the team clapping him on the back.

Steve doesn't feel like getting up yet because as bad as basketball practice is, it's nothing compared to being home.

His parents are away—not that they would provide much comfort if they were home—and being alone in that big empty house makes Steve's skin crawl. Once upon a time, he would have celebrated the

ample party opportunities, but now everything is quiet and terrifying and he can't sleep because every time he closes his eyes he sees those fucking monsters coming for him and Dustin.

So he stays on the empty gymnasium floor for a few more minutes, paying attention only to his heart beating, hard and fast against the ground, feeling sweat fall from his forehead into his hair.

When he eventually makes his way to the showers, he is relieved to find the locker room empty. Peeling off his clothes, he steps under the spray of the showerhead and turns it up. Warm, hot, hotter, scalding and Steve lets the water burn his skin because feeling the scorching skin reminds him that he's still alive and not stuck below the ground in the tunnels where it's so cold and so dark you can *taste it*.

Steve squeezes his eyes tightly then because he can tell it's about to happen again. He is going to have a motherfucking panic attack in the motherfucking locker room.

He presses his back to the cool cement wall, trying to calm down, but his body has other ideas and his knees buckle so he ends up cowering on the floor instead, head in his trembling hands. Logically, Steve knows that he is safe and in the shower and far away from those tunnels, but he's powerless and all he can do is gasp for breath as burning water and tears and snot drip over his lips.

Trying desperately to regain control, Steve does not hear the door slam. Nor does he hear footsteps approach him. What he does hear, however, is "*Harrington?*"

Steve looks up so fast his head smacks the wall and he sees Billy fucking Hargrove standing over him with an unreadable expression.

Fuck. I look like such a fucking pussy. He realizes that he's probably going to have to fight Billy now and that he is definitely never going to live this down.

"Shit."

Steve could not imagine a worse person to find him huddled naked

and having a breakdown in the shower.

He also could not have imagined what Billy does next.

Wordlessly, Billy offers him a hand, which Steve hesitantly accepts. He stands up—shakily—turns the water off, and then becomes very aware of how naked he is.

“Panic attack?” Billy inquires, tossing him a towel which he gratefully wraps around his waist.

Steve nods, still not sure what exactly is going on.

“What could possibly be wrong in the kingdom?” Though the words themselves are taunting, Billy’s voice has no malice in it. Steve thinks he even sees a hint of concern in Billy’s indecipherable expression before he remembers this is Billy fucking Hargrove, and he does not concern himself with other people.

Steve lets out a humorless laugh. “You have no idea.”

“Does it have something to do with Max and her geek squad?” Billy leans against one of the lockers, popping a toothpick between his lips, eyes burning with curiosity.

Steve shrugs. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t.” Whatever hint of concern Steve thought he saw disappears in an instant, and Billy’s expression hardens. “Just still trying to figure out why I woke up alone in an empty house covered with some schizo kid’s drawings everywhere and now you and Max and all her weird little friends are freaking out,” he drawls.

“I’m not ‘freaking out,’” Steve answers indignantly, but even as he says it he knows it’s not true. He is totally freaking out.

Billy cocks an eyebrow and focuses his gaze on Steve, his piercing blue eyes probing. “Well it kinda looked that way.”

“Whatever, man.” Steve opens his own locker and slides his boxers on beneath the towel, letting it fall to the ground once they’re firmly around his waist. “It’s a long—“

The rest of his sentence dies in his throat because Billy's eyes are roaming across Steve's half-naked body like he wants to eat him *alive*.

He doesn't know how to respond so he makes an attempt at a joke. "Um, my eyes are up here, Hargrove," he tries lamely, pulling his shirt over his head.

Billy shifts the toothpick in his mouth and smirks at him. "Just trying to figure out what it is about you that has all these girls creaming their pants."

"Hardly." Steve finishes getting dressed and, as he laces up his sneakers, notices that Billy is still staring at him. It feels less predatory now; it's hard and intense and curious.

"What *did* happen to you and those shitheads that night?" Billy inquires. Steve feels any lightheartedness evaporate from his body as those images slam into his head.

"Nothing happened. You were acting batshit crazy so Max stepped in and saved you from getting sent to jail for murdering me." Steve tries to act casual even though his palms are sweating and *he really doesn't want to talk about that night*.

Billy snorts. "So me beating the shit out of you is what made you pussy out in the showers just now?"

"Fuck off, Hargrove." Steve watches Billy's demeanor change the minute he utters those words.

"No, really. Is that it?" The blonde's voice is taunting and he has that crazed look in his eye that Steve is so familiar with.

"Hmm, Harrington? You got a little knocked around and now you're scared? Bullshit. Don't fucking lie to me." Billy's fists are balled up now and Steve is pretty sure he's looking at round two of last week.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You're mentally unstable, you know that?"

Billy stalks towards him, slowly, like some kind of hungry lion (a fitting description, given the hair) and brings his face much too close

to Steve's.

"Maybe I am." His voice is low and menacing. "So you'd better watch your back, Harrington." Then he smiles much too widely—shark-like—and walks out of the locker room, slamming the door behind him.

Steve runs a hand through his hair.

Yep. Billy Hargrove is definitely going to kill me.

Friday passes pretty much the same as Thursday did, and the concerned looks from Nancy are getting worse. She comes up to his locker after sixth period and her eyes look so fucking fretful that it makes Steve want to hit something.

"Hey." She touches his arm gently and he's annoyed that he feels loss when she moves her hand away. "Jonathan and I are going to go see that new movie 'Nightmare on Elm Street' tonight. Looks pretty scary. Wanna come?"

Steve cannot help the look of disbelief he knows appears on his face. "Um," he says slowly, trying to figure out how to nicely explain to Nancy that the last fucking thing he wants to do is tag along on her date with Jonathan. He settles on "are you trying to babysit me, Nancy Wheeler?"

"No, no, of course not! I'm just worried about you."

"Nance, I appreciate that, really, but we all went through the same shit, remember? Shouldn't you be worried about Mike or Jonathan or something? Maybe I should be worried about you, pipsqueak." Steve tries to make his voice sound teasing to conceal how goddamn emasculating it is that Nancy is worried about *him*, of all people.

"Well it's just that you're the only one who—" Nancy blushes and bites her lip, like she said something wrong.

Oh.

Steve gets it now.

He's the only one who came out of this mess alone. Nancy has Jonathan, Mrs. Byers has Hopper, even the gang of little shitheads have a bond that Steve doesn't have with, well, anyone.

But he certainly is not going to try and find that bond with fucking Nancy and Jonathan.

"Hey, I'm fine." He tries his best to sound reassuring, hating that he can already tell Nancy doesn't buy it. (And why would she when he's got bags under his eyes from not sleeping since October?) "I've got plans tonight anyways. Clarissa Benson is having a party."

He isn't planning on going; never was, but Steve takes a weird kind of pleasure in the way that sentence makes Nancy look affronted.

"I didn't know you were hanging out with your old friends again."

Steve just shrugs, ready to be done with this humiliating conversation. Wishing he were ready to be done with Nancy Wheeler.

"I'll catch you Monday, okay?" He walks away before Nancy can respond.

When Steve gets home, he grabs a beer, heats up a frozen pizza, and then collapses on the couch, the bone-weariness he tries to hide at school finally catching up with him. He flicks to a channel showing an old episode of "The Dukes of Hazzard" and feels the warmth from the alcohol buzzing through his veins.

The hum of the TV and light splashing over every corner of the room make him feel almost safe. Steve feels his eyelids getting heavy.

"Dustin!"

He can hear the kids screaming for them but it's too late. They're coming. Fuck. FUCK. Steve watches the demodogs rush towards them in slow-motion, throwing an arm around Dustin's neck to pull him slightly behind him.

There's nothing he can do. He wasn't quick enough and now Dustin's going to die and they're both going to get ripped to shreds in front of the three other kids screaming their names.

He feels Dustin go limp in his arms as the first wave of demodogs reaches them. He can't reach for his bat, can't do anything but watch as they come for them, watch as they open up their faces and there are so many teeth—too many teeth—and they come for Dustin first and he's screaming for Steve, screaming for help—

Steve jolts awake, swinging his arms wildly at monsters that aren't there before he realizes that he's in his living room and he's alone and nothing's coming to get him.

He sits up and drops his head into his hands, scrubbing furiously at his eyes because he is *too fucking old* to be crying about nightmares.

As soon as he regains control of his breath, he gets up and turns every light in the house on.

On his way back to the living room, he pauses before sitting down on the couch. He thinks about the prospect of a night spent staring absently at TV reruns, eating leftovers and jumping at any creaks in a house too big for its own good, trying and failing to fall asleep in a dark bedroom because he's too fucking old to sleep with the lights on.

He remembers Clarissa Benson's party.

Fuck it.

2. II

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve kind of expects Billy to take a swing at him for that (kind of expects Billy to take a swing at him for *anything*), but Billy just grimaces instead, takes another drag. He stares at Steve for a long time, blue eyes piercing, and then puts his hands up in surrender.

“Just...come back inside, Harrington. No fighting.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it took me so long to update! I moved and then went home for a week so it was tough to find time to write. Also, I spent way too much time trying to figure out what songs should be playing at the party and if they would be historically accurate. Just ask @lymricks.

The party is in full-swing by the time Steve gets there, The Pointer Sisters blaring over the speakers and the football team playing beer pong on the patio.

Steve feels uncertain as he lingers in the kitchen, sipping a tepid Schlitz.

“Steve!” he hears, and turns to see Clarissa Benson beaming at him. “You came! That’s so rad.” She takes a step forward and rolls her shoulders back just enough to push her tits out without being too obvious. Steve feels a little less uncertain. It may have been a while but this—this he knows.

“Yeah,” he takes a swig of his beer, “cool party.”

She giggles in response and coyly reaches for his hand. “Dance?” she asks, but it’s not really a question. Steve chugs the rest of his beer as quickly as he can and then grabs another for good measure.

Clarissa's pretty cute, he muses as she runs her hands up his chest and sways her hips. She's blonde—Steve's always had a thing for blondes—and it's been a while since he cut loose. His chest tightens briefly as he thinks about Nancy, but then "Billie Jean" is playing so he cracks open his beer and drains it, grabs Clarissa by the hand and spins her around.

About a foot away from them, Tommy seems to be trying to block Carol's windpipe with his tongue, right hand squeezing her ass. Steve rolls his eyes and returns his attention to Clarissa. She's still smiling brightly at him, curls bouncing as she dances. She smells like strawberry shampoo. Steve is feeling *really* fucking good—monsters and tunnels and Nancy be damned. It almost feels like a year ago, before he knew that monsters existed, before he started carrying a bat with nails in it like a goddamn teddy bear. He's closing his eyes and leaning in—can almost taste Clarissa's cherry lip gloss—when he hears it.

"Well, well, well, look who decided to grace us with his presence."

He opens his eyes and remembers another reason why Hawkins is nothing like it was a year ago: Billy Hargrove, who is currently grinning at him without an ounce of sincerity, beer dripping down his chin.

"Hargrove," he sighs.

Clarissa, who, like everyone else, is very aware that it is Billy's handiwork painted across Steve's face, laughs nervously.

"Hi Billy!" she says loudly, throwing a look at Carol, who has untangled herself from Tommy and is now staring at them with interest. Steve watches Carol nudge Tommy with her elbow, watches Tommy's face light up as he moves to stand behind Billy, watches Clarissa's eyes dart down to the carpet—probably wondering if his blood will stain, he thinks—and realizes he does not give a shit about any of this.

"Okay, well, this has been fun," he says dryly, and turns to leave. Once upon a time, he might have cared about how it made him look

to back down from a fight, but the world just almost ended and he's seen actual *monsters* and he still can't chew without his jaw hurting and he's just way too fucking tired.

He's halfway down the driveway when he feels a hand on his arm. Out of instinct, he lets out a yell and throws an aimless punch before his arm is caught by a steady hand. It's Billy, looking partly confused and mostly interested.

"Calm down, Harrington, Jesus."

Steve flushes with embarrassment and wrenches his arm out of Billy's grip. "What do you want?"

Billy opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again, and no sound comes out. He looks like a fish, Steve thinks.

Finally, Billy shoves a cigarette in his mouth and scowls at Steve as he lights it, the flame flickering orange across his face.

Steve watches as Billy takes a long drag, index finger and thumb pinching the cigarette as he takes it out of his mouth and blows a stream of smoke at the stars.

He's not sure why he's still standing in the driveway, staring at Billy as he smokes.

He must be drunker than he thought.

"What do you want?" Steve repeats, but this time his voice has a lot less bite.

"I wasn't gonna hit you," Billy says, looking somewhere to Steve's left. "You didn't have to leave."

Steve thinks he must be the one who looks like a fish now, because his jaw goes slack and he stares at Billy in disbelief.

"Right," he scoffs, "because it's strange for me to assume that you might go full-on psycho and try to beat me to death like you did—oh, I don't know—*a week ago?*"

Steve kind of expects Billy to take a swing at him for that (kind of expects Billy to take a swing at him for *anything*), but Billy just grimaces instead, takes another drag. He stares at Steve for a long time, blue eyes piercing, and then puts his hands up in surrender.

“Just...come back inside, Harrington. No fighting.”

Steve doesn't move, wonders if this is all an elaborate prank, but Billy looks more serious than he's ever seen him.

“Please.” Billy says so softly Steve thinks he could have imagined it. Billy lowers his hands and taps the end of his cigarette, ash floating down to the cement.

“Okay,” Steve says before he can think about it too much. He really doesn't want to go home.

It's like Billy's whole body relaxes then, and he reaches out and claps Steve on the shoulder. “Alright!” He stubs out his cigarette and smirks. “Let's get King Steve a fuckin' beer!”

And Steve—despite himself—grins.

The next few hours get progressively hazier. Billy, true to his word, gets Steve a beer; gets him about six, actually. Steve remembers shouting along to “Total Eclipse of the Heart” until Billy threatens to punch him in the throat. He remembers Clarissa winding her arms around his neck and Billy unceremoniously tugging her off before grabbing Steve's shoulders and steering him towards the backyard—towards the keg. Steve remembers beating Billy's record, remembers Billy crowing in delight and leading the spectators in a rousing chant of “King Steve! King Steve! King Steve!”

Steve almost forgets about the bruises decorating his face, the ones Billy left there. He decides pretty quickly that he would rather not remember that.

He's just wiping beer from his chin when Billy slings his arm around Steve and whistles, long and low, in his ear. “King Steve, back from the dead, huh?” His voice sounds like velvet.

Steve rolls his eyes and attempts to shove Billy away but he's fucking

plastered and really only manages a feeble push.

“Wanna smoke?” Billy’s still so close, asks the question in barely more than a whisper. Steve feels his breath, hot on the shell of his ear. He nods and feels a bit like he’s floating.

Billy pulls away from him and leads the way through the house, Steve close behind. Carol is whispering furiously in Tommy’s ear, gesturing sloppily at the pair of them. Steve doesn’t need to be near them to know what they’re saying: *when the fuck did that happen?*

Steve isn’t entirely sure, himself.

He finds Billy in the driveway, facing away from him and silhouetted by the moon. Steve opens his mouth to ask for a cig but what comes out instead is: “dude, *how* can you wear pants that tight? You’re gonna, like, cut off your dick circulation.” Immediately after he says it, he thinks, *what the fuck?*

Billy turns around slowly, leering, and licks around his entire mouth. “You thinking about my dick, Harrington?”

Steve thinks about what would happen if he just, like, sprinted down the driveway and went home. He’s trying to calculate the distance from Clarissa’s house to his—since he’s definitely too drunk to drive—when something else thankfully captures Billy’s interest.

Billy makes a face. “I fuckin’ hate this song.”

“Time After Time” is playing on the speakers inside, so loud even out front that Steve marvels at the fact that the cops haven’t shown up yet.

“Hey,” he protests, “this is a *good song*.”

Billy groans and shakes his head. “Goddamn, Harrington. Goddamn. You’re lucky you’re pretty.”

It feels really different than it usually does—Billy calling him pretty—when they’re alone at midnight out in Clarissa Benson’s driveway straddling the line between being too drunk to remember and just drunk enough to be reckless.

“Yeah,” Steve snorts, “I’m sure I look real pretty these days.” He was going for funny, but Billy looks for a second like he might be sick.

“I’m sorry,” Billy breathes, and the words hang in the air between them. His Adam’s apple bobs as his throat works and Steve feels frozen. “I wish I could take it back.”

Steve momentarily forgets how to speak. And then he says, “it’s okay.”

As he says it, he realizes that it is. Except—

“You gotta apologize to Lucas too.”

Billy looks like he wants to argue but then decides against it and instead clicks his teeth together twice and nods.

“Yeah,” he says, “okay.”

Cyndi Lauper is still crooning and Steve can’t help himself; he starts humming. Billy rolls his eyes. He still hasn’t gotten either of them a cigarette. Steve doesn’t want to bring it up.

They look at each other for a long minute, a really awkward staring contest. Until—

“IF YOU’RE LOST YOU CAN LOOK, AND YOU WILL FIND ME,” Steve sings, because he’s getting nervous and also because he really *does* think this is a good song.

And Billy...laughs? Not in a mean way, or anything, he just *laughs*. Throws his head back and cackles and it makes something flutter in Steve’s stomach. When he meets Steve’s gaze his eyes are warm and twinkling like Steve never thought they could.

“I like your laugh.” It sounds stupid when he says it, the words heavy on his tongue. Steve braces himself for another blush-inducing lewd comment, but Billy doesn’t make one. His smile fades but his eyes stay soft and then he’s *right there in front of Steve*, looking warm and vulnerable and—if Steve’s being honest—kind of beautiful.

“Billy—” Steve starts but Billy’s already got a hand on his neck, at

once scorching and not hot enough. Steve can't remember what it is he wanted to say.

Billy steps forward, presses close, keeps pressing close, and leads Steve backwards until his back hits the garage door and they're hidden in the shadows. Billy's other hand curls into Steve's collar and he runs his nose along Steve's jaw until his mouth is at his ear.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Steve doesn't hesitate before he says no.

Billy moves fast, sucking Steve's earlobe in his ear and moving his hands under his polo. His hands are burning—Steve feels like he's on fire—and it seems like they're everywhere, running up his chest and down his back towards the curve of his ass.

When one of Billy's hands trails down to Steve's belt buckle, a small voice in the back of Steve's head reminds him that he should maybe be a little more concerned about hooking up with a *guy* because, up until two seconds ago, he hadn't really thought about it. Sure, he stared at Billy for a bit too long sometimes, but that was more to make sure Billy didn't just whip out a gun and shoot him in the face—staring at Billy was a self-defense tactic. Right?

A pinch of Steve's nipple has him yelping and yanked back to the present.

"Still with me pretty boy?" Billy bites at Steve's neck, worrying the skin between his teeth and Steve's hips jerk forward against Billy's hand. Billy chuckles into Steve's neck. "Thought so."

Steve *would* open his mouth to retort but suddenly Billy's hand is slipping past the waistband of his jeans and wrapped around his cock. There's too much friction and the angle is kind of weird but, with Billy's palm rubbing his shaft and his thumb smearing the dribble of precome across his head and his mouth at his collarbone, Steve comes in under a minute.

Billy wipes his hand streaked with Steve's come on his polo and seems to relish in the noise of protest Steve makes at the act.

“Aw, don’t worry Harrington, it’ll wash right out,” he says with a wink.

Fumbling to tuck himself back in his pants, Steve watches as Billy lights a cigarette. He presses his fingertips to his eyes until he sees patterns, trying not to think too hard about how sober he feels all of a sudden and the come cooling on his stomach, courtesy of the same guy who broke his nose the night that monsters—

Steve knows that thinking too hard about any of that will just end poorly. So he wordlessly reaches out and plucks the cigarette from Billy’s mouth and takes a drag. He’s going to have to go home eventually, knows he’ll end up thinking about all the kinds of monsters there are in the world—both alien and teenaged—as he watches the light filtering through his blinds change from the sickly blue glow of the pool to the muted grey light of dawn.

He and Billy share the cigarette in silence until it’s down to the filter; it seems like Steve maybe isn’t the only one who doesn’t want to go home.

It feels much too soon that Billy’s crushing the smoke beneath his boot and sauntering off down the driveway. After he’s walked a few feet away he suddenly turns around, blue eyes so bright they’re *glowing*.

“Hey, Harrington,” he calls, “see you Monday.” Steve isn’t sure whether it sounds like a threat or a promise.

“See you Monday, Hargrove.”

Steve can hear Billy’s laugh long after he disappears into the dark.

3. III

Summary for the Chapter:

“Harrington, what *happened* to you?” His voice is so soft. Steve is struck momentarily by the overwhelming urge to tell him.

I’m losing it, I’m fucking falling apart, he wants to scream. But he can’t. Not to Billy—not to anyone.

Steve thinks about Billy all weekend. It’s a welcome distraction from the nightmares, which are only getting worse. He’s so fucking *tired* but it’s like his brain refuses to quiet down until the darkness of the night is washed away by the rising sun. Then, Steve manages a few hours of restless sleep, heart in his throat and bat within arm’s reach.

He thinks he might actually be going crazy.

On Sunday morning, he slogs through his Calculus homework over a bowl of Count Chocula. It takes him four hours and three bowls of cereal.

He wonders if Billy will be different at school on Monday, or if he’ll pretend it never happened. Steve isn’t sure which he’d prefer. (Except that every time he thinks about Billy’s mouth on his neck his jeans get tight, and he’s spent a solid portion of his sleepless nights jacking off instead of staring at the wall and waiting for monsters to come).

“*See you Monday*,” echoes in his head.

When Steve gets to school Monday morning, Nancy and Jonathan are already hovering by his usual parking space.

He groans as he cuts the engine and prepares himself for a lecture. He is painfully familiar with Nancy’s lecturing face.

“You actually went to Clarissa’s party?” Is the first thing he hears when he gets out of the car.

“Hi Nance, how was your weekend?” He grumbles, shooting

Jonathan a you-stole-my-girlfriend-the-least-you-can-do-is-get-me-out-of-this-situation look. He's not sure if that is actually a look but, judging by the way Jonathan grimaces in pity, he knows he's made his point.

"Fine. But Steve, if you're having a hard time you know you can always talk to us."

And Steve wants to be mad—he wants to be mad *so fucking badly*—but he just can't. Because, God help him, he still loves her. Wants to scream it at her until it sinks in.

Instead, he puts a hand on her shoulder and smiles. At both of them. "Thanks, guys. But I'm okay, really."

He can tell that neither of them are convinced. He doesn't blame them, he doesn't believe it either.

Steve moves through the day like he's in a dream, barely paying attention. He feels like he took one of his mom's Quaaludes and is floating somewhere miles above Hawkins, watching himself go through the motions of a regular Monday.

"Mr. Harrington? What are your thoughts?"

"Ah, um, sorry Mrs. Samson. Can you repeat the question?"

Mrs. Samson's nostrils flare slightly as she fixes Steve with a stern look.

"The question is whether Heathcliff is a force of evil or a victim of it?"

Steve blinks.

"Perhaps someone can give Steve a hand?"

"Heathcliff never stood a chance," Steve hears Billy drawl from the back of the room. He doesn't want to turn around.

"*See you Monday,*" Steve thinks.

“Go on, Mr. Hargrove,” Mrs. Samson encourages.

“He was treated like dirt his whole life. He was never good enough, always second-class, but still he loved Catherine—” Steve turns around and sees Billy lounging in his chair, posture careless but eyes burning. Staring at Steve. “—he loved her so much he tried to make himself worthy of her. And even *then*, he knew she was too good for him. Always would be.” Steve watches something in Billy’s expression go dark. Watches him draw his shoulders up and look away. “Too good for him socially, I mean. Personality-wise she’s a total bitch.”

The rest of the class snickers. Steve waits for Billy to look smug, but he just keeps glaring down at his desk.

“Thank you for that valuable insight, Billy, but let’s keep the profanity to a minimum, shall we?” Mrs. Samson says dryly.

Mrs. Samson resumes her lecture and Steve feels himself drift away again. He’s so tired. The memory of Billy’s eyes on his pierce his daydreams like blades. He wonders if maybe Billy has been thinking about him too. Then he rolls his eyes at the absurdity of his thought and Billy fades from his mind as exhaustion creeps in. He resumes his stupor.

After school, Steve smokes half a joint behind the bleachers. The idea of enduring another well-meaning-but-excruciating conversation about his mental well-being with Nancy and Jonathan sounds worse than his nightmares, honestly.

Once he’s deemed the coast clear, he makes his way to his car, the last in the lot. Head buzzing with a pleasant high, he turns the heat on high, puts his seat back, and falls asleep.

Steve wakes choking on tainted air that isn’t there, heart thudding in his ears, so *fucking certain* he heard the telltale clatter of the feet of hundreds of demodogs. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“I’m in my car,” he says aloud. Unlike the taste of the ash in the air, the clattering sound hasn’t yet faded. “I’m in my—*shit*.”

Billy is rapping on his passenger side window, ring on his middle finger clattering noisily against the glass and creating that unpleasant sound.

Steve brings his seat upright and rolls down the window, hoping he doesn't look as panicked as he feels.

"Uh, can I help you?"

"What's wrong with you?" Billy demands. "You were having some kind of fit. Twitching and yelling and shit."

Steve feels his face color. So much for keeping it cool. He tries to come up with an excuse that won't sound like he's going insane but his heart is still pounding and he feels so fucking unsteady that he can't think of one.

"Just go away, Hargrove," he groans.

Billy takes a drag of his ever-present Marlboro and blows smoke out his nostrils before flicking the butt on the ground and opening the door. Steve watches dumbly as Billy Hargrove makes himself comfortable in the passenger seat of his car.

"Is it the same thing that got you in the locker room?" Billy asks.

Steve nods slowly.

Billy studies him for a long minute.

"Harrington, what *happened* to you?" His voice is so soft. Steve is struck momentarily by the overwhelming urge to tell him.

I'm losing it, I'm fucking falling apart, he wants to scream. But he can't. Not to Billy—not to anyone. So, he opts for the tamer response.

"I can't sleep," he admits with a shrug.

"No kidding, you look like a fucking zombie," Billy cracks.

Steve snorts and chances a glance at Billy. Billy is grinning at him, tongue wedged in between his teeth. As they look at each other,

Billy's grin fades. His eyes are so blue. Steve forgets how to breathe.

"I can't stop thinking about Friday night," he confesses without thinking, the words stretched in between them like a tightrope.

Billy swallows but doesn't look away. Emboldened by his response, Steve leans across the console and into Billy's space. Billy's eyes flick down to Steve's lips and back up to his eyes.

"Harrington," Billy's voice is hoarse, "I gotta' go. I gotta—" Billy's out of the car before he finishes his sentence, slamming the door and stuffing a cigarette between his lips.

Steve watches him walk back to the Camaro, bewildered and rejected, still hovering in the warmth Billy left behind.

Max is the first to emerge from the middle school, red hair trailing behind her and skateboard tucked under her arm as she runs to the Camaro, shouting a hasty goodbye to the rest of the Party. Billy speeds out of the parking lot before the rest of the kids even make it down the steps.

The kids are arguing about comics when they get in the car; Steve is too exhausted to be annoyed. Glancing into the rearview mirror as he backs out of his parking space, Steve catches a glimpse of Lucas staring longingly out the window at the spot where the Camaro sat.

Yeah, he thinks bitterly, *me too*.

Dustin is always the last to be dropped off. He claims it makes the most sense to go from Hawkins Middle to the Byers' to the Wheeler's to the Sinclair's to the Henderson's, despite the fact that the Byerses live closest to the Harringtons, but Steve knows it's actually because Dustin loves the ten minutes they spend talking in his driveway. Last week, Dustin had stared at Steve with all the seriousness of a thirteen-year-old who's fought monsters and said, "Steve, you're like my best friend now." (Steve felt both flattered and kinda lame). Privately, Steve enjoys those ten minutes too.

"Steve," Dustin begins solemnly, "we need to have a talk."

Steve bites his cheek to stop himself from smiling at the expression

on Dustin's face. "Right. About what?"

"The Party and I are concerned," Dustin pauses to thoughtfully unwrap a candy bar and take a bite. In between smacks of his lips, he continues, "about you."

Steve drops his head against the steering wheel. "Oh my *God*, what is *with* you people?"

"You look terrible," Dustin says matter-of-factly. "Like a younger Emperor Palpatine; your eyes are all sunken in and your skin is pasty."

"Hey," Steve says, offended. He isn't entirely sure who Emperor Palpatine is—do any countries even still have emperors?—but, "my skin is *not* pasty!"

"Steve."

"Dustin."

Dustin shoots Steve a grave look, made significantly more amusing by the chocolate smudged on his bottom lip. "I just want you to know you're not alone in this," he says, bottom lip jutting out.

Something in Steve's chest goes tight. He ruffles Dustin's curls. "Thanks, buddy. I know." If his voice wavers a little, neither of them comment on it.

Tuesday passes in a similar haze; Steve gets knocked down in basketball so many times that the coach threatens to kick him off the team. Billy taunts him the same as ever, like Friday night never happened, like Monday afternoon never happened. Steve still doesn't sleep. He thinks about Nancy implying he's the only one going through it alone and Dustin telling him he's not. He thinks about how he's never felt more alone. He knows he'd never let that burden hang on Dustin's shoulders.

He's so tired.

On Wednesday, Billy is late to first period. His curls are flattened on one side and he's wearing a white Henley instead of his usual barely-buttoned button-down shirt. He must have overslept, Steve thinks, as he watches Billy blearily mumble an apology to Mr. Hotchkiss and pull out his notebook. Steve can't stop looking at Billy. He looks so much younger when he's tired. As if he can hear Steve thinking about him, Billy shoots him a shit-eating grin and cocks his eyebrow. Steve quickly turns back to his Calculus.

After school, Steve doesn't hide behind the bleachers like he did on Monday. Instead, he leans against the door of his car, scanning the parking lot for the telltale blue of the Camaro. He ignores the way his heart sinks when he doesn't see it, tells himself he's just horny and Billy *really* knows his way around a guy's cock. (Steve quickly decides he does not want to think about why that is.) He nods to a few guys from the basketball team, waves at Nancy and Jonathan, then drives to Tom's for a milkshake.

He heads back to Hawkins fifteen minutes before AV Club gets out. Billy and his Camaro are still nowhere to be seen.

It remains empty when the kids appear, talking animatedly. Max scans the parking lot with a furrowed brow and then follows the other four to Steve's car.

"Hey, Steve—"

"—yeah, I'll give you a ride," he finishes. "Hop in."

She smiles gratefully and piles in next to Lucas, who looks a bit like he just won the lottery.

Steve does his usual carpool lap, each kid calling out a cheery goodbye until the only ones left are Dustin and Max.

When Steve pulls up to the Hargrove house, he sees the Camaro parked out front.

"What the hell? Why couldn't Billy pick you up?" He says, annoyed, turning to face Max in the backseat.

"He was late for school this morning. His dad wanted him to come

home after school so they could talk. I thought he'd be back to pick me up but..." Max looks uncomfortable.

Steve opens his mouth to question her when she suddenly says, "oh no." He whips his head back around to follow her gaze.

Billy is storming out of the house, blood pouring from his nose and staining the white Henley Steve had noticed only hours before.

Max is sprinting out of the car then. She stops in front of Billy, talking urgently to him. He shakes his head and she runs into the house.

Before he can really think about it, Steve is unbuckling his seatbelt and running to Billy too. "Billy what—what—"

His face looks even worse up close. Billy's been crying—maybe still is—Steve doesn't get a chance to inspect because Billy is shoving past him.

"Get out of here, Harrington." He says, voice low and dangerous.

"Did your dad—"

Before Steve can finish his sentence, Billy shoves him backwards. He almost lands on his ass, but past encounters have taught him to plant his feet.

"I said get *out of here!*" Billy yells. He's trembling.

Steve doesn't move; watches as Billy gets into his Camaro, slams the door and roars down the street.

It takes a minute before he gets back into the car, where a wide-eyed Dustin is staring at him.

"What the fuck?" Dustin swears.

Steve looks at the driveway, sees droplets of blood scattered across the concrete—Billy's blood. He feels sick.

"I don't know," he says quietly.

They don't talk for the rest of the car ride.

When Steve gets into bed that night, he closes his eyes and sees Billy, trembling and bleeding in the tunnels under Hawkins.

"Help me," Billy cries. "Help!" Steve is glued to the ground. There's nothing he can do. He watches, powerless, as the first wave of demodogs attack, hears Billy screaming until he can't.

By the time the demodogs leave, Billy is gone; the only thing left of him is a blood-stained Henley.

Author's Note:

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